FORUM

U.S. National Arboretum Revives Historic Cherries

It's a big month for us at the U.S. National Arboretum here in Washington, D.C. We have a special gift for the hundreds of thousands of visitors who come to the nation's capital each spring—a gift that marries the science of botany with the art of historic preservation.

Our gift is 500 Yoshino cherry trees. But these are by no means ordinary cherry trees. These are trees propagated from original lines that Tokyo mayor Yukio Ozaki gave to the United States in 1912.

U.S. National Park Service gardeners have given their all to preserve these "witness trees." But at 87, they've already lived twice as long as the average lifespan of their species, and propagation is the only means of ensuring their further survival.

It's not the first time the U.S. National Arboretum has helped preserve the 1912 Yoshinos. As you read this month's *Agricultural Research*, you'll learn that dedicated scientists have worked to improve and preserve these ornamental trees—which draw 600,000 tourists to the Washington, D.C., area every springtime.

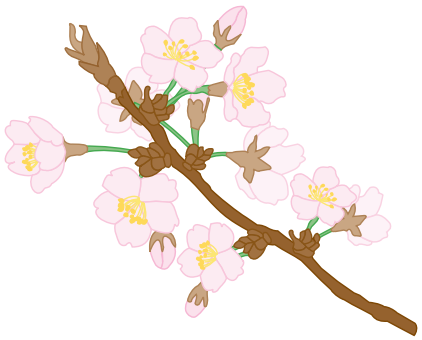
And our work isn't just to benefit the trees around the Tidal Basin. We continue to develop ornamental hybrids from a host of species for public parks and private landscaping. These new varieties are more resistant to diseases and pests and are more likely to survive environmental insults, like flooding.

Former arboretum director John L. Creech did a lot of seeding research on modern cherries from Japan. His *Prunus incisa* cherry selections Snow Cloud and Fair Elaine were from the arboretum's cherry germplasm pool. They are just now being evaluated by nurseries. Of the arboretum's cherry program, Creech once observed, "The U.S. National Arboretum is the only major arboretum that has both the mandate and the resources to conduct this type of research."

Which prompts the question: Why does the U.S. Department of Agriculture spend $7.3 million each year on horticultural and landscaping research?

Consider these facts from USDA's Economic Research Service and the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census:

- Floriculture and horticulture industries are increasing by $500 million annually in grower cash receipts, making this the fastest growing segment of U.S. agriculture.
- According to the most recent statistics, the average nursery or greenhouse farmer can expect an annual return of $53,589—more than from any other commodity. A cotton farmer, the runner-up, nets about $42,396.
- In terms of 1990 employment, floriculture and horticulture industries were the second leading employer in U.S. production agriculture, right behind beef.
- The United States continues to be a net importer of greenhouse and nursery products. But the projected total dollar value of our 1998 exports of these products is estimated at $265 million, an increase of about 5 percent from 1997. Currently, we import about $1.1 billion worth. Increasing domestic production would help offset the trade deficit.
- In addition, environmental horticulture ranks among the top five agricultural commodities in 28 states. It offers communities a chance for rural development and gives farmers a way to diversify their crops for enhanced profits.



Much of ARS research is focused on feeding the human body. Ornamental research is unique in that it feeds the human soul.

ARS has made significant contributions to floral and nursery research while spending less than 1 percent of the agency's budget on environmental horticulture. This includes the gardens at the U.S. National Arboretum that bring so much pleasure to Washington's residents and visitors alike.

Only 0.6 percent, or $4.2 million, of ARS' budget is spent directly on floral and nursery research. For that modest investment, the agency is getting world-class scientific work in the areas of biological pest control, disease prevention, and development of new floral hybrids.

But there's something just as important going on here. As one of our researchers likes to tell his graduate students and technicians, "Much of ARS research is focused on feeding the human body, but ornamental research is unique in that it feeds the human soul." That's an important point.

Why are so many people passionate about the Yoshino cherry trees? Why do employees of the National Park Service give so much effort and care to them and to other historic trees—like the stately sycamore that stood during the Battle of Antietam? The fact is, there's something valuable in these trees that all the money in the world can't replace.

Flowers and trees help make life worthwhile. And if we can spend millions to preserve classic works of art, surely we can say that an investment in nature's masterpieces is equally important.

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